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| **Cultural Diffusion**  [*Cultural diffusion*](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/grade3/glossary.html#a) concerns the spread of culture and the factors that account for it, such as migration, communications, trade, and commerce. Because culture moves over space, the geography of culture is constantly changing. Generally, culture traits originate in a particular area and spread outward, ultimately to characterize a larger expanse of territory. *Culture region* describes the location of culture traits or cultural communities; *cultural diffusion* helps explain how they got there.  For example, New York State generally lies within the English-speaking culture region. Nevertheless there are significant cultural communities within New York State in which Spanish, Chinese, Hebrew, Arabic, or another language is dominant (see Fig. 5). Similarly, while most of New York State is part of the Christian culture region, there also are local cultural communities in which Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism is dominant. What all these languages and religions have in common is that none originated in New York State or even in North America. Rather, each has come to characterize segments of the Empire State as a result of cultural diffusion.   |  | | --- | |  | | **Fig. 5.** New York City’s Chinatown is a product of cultural diffusion. |   Similar stories apply to other parts of the world. If you were to teach about Australia, for example, your students would learn that that continent was once the exclusive domain of an aboriginal cultural community. Because of cultural diffusion, however, most of the present-day Australian people and their homeland bear the unmistakable imprint of European culture—particularly, cultural characteristics that diffused from Great Britain.   |  | | --- | |  | | **Fig. 6.** A McDonald’s in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Businesses as well as people can exemplify cultural diffusion. |   Cultural diffusion occurs in different ways. As suggested by the examples above, [migration](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/grade3/glossary.html#29) is an important example. When people move, they take their "cultural baggage" with them. Thus, there are uncountable instances, past and present, in which the arrival of migrants has resulted in the appearance of culture traits or entire cultural communities in areas where they were not previously present. An important modern variation involves businesses that establish facilities or outlets in foreign lands. Thus, the appearance of McDonald’s, Burger King, and Starbucks outside the U.S. is a form of cultural diffusion—and so too the appearance of sushi bars in America (see Fig. 6).  People’s tendency to copy one another characterizes another type of cultural diffusion. An example occurs when a farmer looks over the fence, sees a neighboring farmer using a new or different agricultural technique, and adopts it. Similarly, people sometimes adopt a new [cultural trait](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/grade3/glossary.html#b) in response to contact with an advertisement, or by seeing something on TV or in a movie, or by interacting directly with people who display a particular cultural trait.  Finally,there is anoft-observed tendency for culture traits to originate and take hold in large cities and then "trickle down" the settlement hierarchy to smaller cities, towns, and rural areas. Contemporary cultural fads in particular have a tendency to diffuse in this manner. Because diffusion occurs over time as well as over space, there may be a time lag between the origin of a trait in a large city and its appearance in small towns and rural areas.  Nowadays, the above phenomenon is particularly evident and important in developing countries, where modernization tends to take hold in major cities and then trickle down to the countryside. If your students were to study about China, for example, they would discover a land of rapidly modernizing cities—many with world-class industries, office towers, and port facilities. In contrast, portions of rural China are still dominated by traditional pre-modern agricultural tools and techniques.  In reality, therefore, China is not *a* cultural community, but is instead a mosaic of *many* cultural communities. The same is true of Mexico, India, Peru, and virtually every other country on Earth today. Cultural differences exist within countries as well as between them. Thus, when you choose a country to teach about "cultural community," your students should come away with an understanding that, say, all Chinese (or all Mexicans, Indians, Peruvians, etc.) are not the same. Rather, countries are composed of numerous cultural communities, just as in the United States.  When a cultural item diffuses, it typically does not keep spreading and spreading forever. Instead it tends to diffuse outward from its place of origin, encounter one or more [*barrier effects*](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/grade3/glossary.html#3)—things that inhibit cultural diffusion—and stop spreading. Barrier effects can assume physical or social forms. [*Physical barrier effects*](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/grade3/glossary.html#32) consist of characteristics of the natural (physical) environment that inhibit the spread of culture. The classic examples are oceans, deserts, mountain ranges, dense forests, and frigid climates. For example, the Atlantic Ocean was a physical barrier that prevented the westward spread of European culture for many centuries. The dense rain forest of the Amazon lowlands long served as a physical barrier, isolating numerous native peoples and their ancient ways of life. While some of these groups have recently experienced culture change wrought by roads and deforestation, others continue to lead traditional lives in remote regions of rainforest. Similarly, the rugged Andes Mountains have long served to inhibit diffusion of foreign culture throughout that region, thus helping to perpetuate indigenous cultural characteristics. One result is that Quechua (pronounced KAY-chew-ah), purportedly the language of the Incas, continues to be spoken by millions of Andean residents.  [*Social barrier effects*](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/grade3/glossary.html#37) consist of characteristics that differentiate human groups and potentially limit interaction between them, thus inhibiting the spread of culture. Examples include language, religion, race and ethnicity, and a history of conflict between specific cultural communities. Islam, for instance, nowadays acts as a social barrier in many Middle Eastern countries by discouraging adoption of certain styles of western dress and music.  For much of human history, therefore, barrier effects tended to isolate cultural communities from each other, inhibiting their ability to share cultural characteristics. Today, however, traditional barrier effects are being overwhelmed by modern means of communication. [Isolation is on the decline](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/grade3/glossary.html#36). Cultural characteristics are diffusing as never before.  Adoption of a new culture item is often accompanied by disuse of an old one. Hence, global decline in cultural diversity is a significant modern trend. Virtually hundreds of languages spoken by formerly isolated peoples will disappear during the next 50 years because, due to diffusion of "modern global languages" (such as English, Spanish, and French), they are not being passed on to the next generation. This does not portend a single global culture, but rather a trend toward cultural communities that come in fewer flavors (see Fig.7).   |  | | --- | |  | | **Fig. 7.** Street scene in Indonesian New Guinea. As exemplified by the number of men in modern attire in the background compared to the man in the foreground, loss of isolation is encouraging disappearance of cultures. |   In some parts of the world, for example, long-cherished cultural traditions are perceived by local practitioners to be threatened by intrusion (i.e., diffusion) of alternatives. [*Westernization*](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/grade3/glossary.html#west) is a term often associated with this process. Thus, while cultural diffusion encourages cultural sharing and interaction between peoples, it may also promote conflict.  Here are some activities to acquaint third graders with the concept of cultural diffusion.  Identify in your household where your food, clothing, appliances, and furniture come from. Make a list and locate places on a map on the basis of the product labels.  Identify and describe components of your culture that originated in another country.  Study a local cultural community that developed as a result of immigration from a foreign land.  Identify local stores and restaurants that typify cultural diffusion.  Make use of the extensive children’s literature that deals with migration to the United States (or to a different country). |